exercise in excessive regulation based on overly abstracted scientific norms. To counter this, Warren ends with a call for a reconstituted coalition of science and public activism. In this sense *Brush with death* participates in the history it chronicles: a book written with a rare combination of scholarly rigour and passionate public concern, it provides an intelligent and provocative platform on which to rethink our place in our leaden world.

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G Chamberlain, *Victor Bonney: the gynaecological surgeon of the twentieth century,* Carnforth, Parthenon Publishing, 2000, pp. xi, 140, illus., £19.95, US$29.95 (1-85070-712-X).

For anyone contemplating a study of élite British medicine in the twentieth century this book is a must. This is particularly true if such a study centres on London and the inter-war years. Nowhere in Britain in the twentieth century could compare with London with its ostentatious display of the wealth and privilege bought by medical practice among the rich. Perhaps the acme of this culture was the Edwardian era, undoubtedly the most class-conscious period in British history. At that time many consultants arrived at the great London hospitals from their servant-riddled houses in W1 to have staff and patients alike bow and scrape before them. The doctors, of course, were giving their time *gratis* to the poor. This was the bourgeois version of *noblesse oblige*. During weekdays, the club or elaborate dinner parties occupied their leisure hours (which for some workaholics were truly few). At the weekends many of them retired to their country homes, to fly fishing and to create exquisite gardens, tended and weeded by local gardeners. Many of these men were the most skilled diagnosticians or accomplished surgeons in the profession although, of course, other Harley Street practitioners flaunted the same style without having equivalent substance. Perhaps rather less flamboyantly and rather more nervously, display of medical opulence continued during the inter-war years, although the Rolls-Royce and the Daimler replaced the horse-drawn carriage. Democratic sentiments, socialist doctors and a murmuring about state medicine no doubt fostered this slightly more muted statement of the profession's ideal place in society.

Victor Bonney was born in 1872, the son of a general practitioner living in Chelsea. Under the tutelage of John Bland Sutton at the Middlesex Hospital and the Chelsea Hospital for Women, this promising young man had by the First World War become one of the most skilled general surgeons, with particular dexterity in gynaecological operations, to grace the London scene. Aged over forty when the war broke out, he had a distinguished publication record largely in practical gynaecology but also in pathological research. The years before the war saw him living in the obligatory relative poverty of the struggling doctor (along with a devoted wife) before the fruits of very hard labour could be fully reaped. War service was based at Clacton-on-Sea where a great deal of general surgery on wounded soldiers occupied the day. Branded a gynaecologist, Bonney never got the reward for his war work that he probably felt he deserved. If he did not, the fame and comfort of inter-war success must have compensated a little. Bonney became an international figure at this time. He had perfected new techniques for total hysterectomy and the removal of fibroids. A generation of Chelsea-trained gynaecologists learned these methods, which although largely not credited today, still live, lying deep in the surgeon's repository of tacit

skills. A study of surgery as craftsmanship awaits its author.

Bonney made money. He operated in nursing homes and toured the West End in two slick cars, one for himself and another going ahead to set up his equipment in private houses. He lived in the style that pre-war teachers had cultivated. He had homes in the West End and Herefordshire. He gave frequent elegant dinner parties. Politically conservative but no prig, he danced at night clubs and enjoyed horse racing. He was never knighted. Rumour had it that this was because he called Queen Mary "Darling" (but, there again, he called everybody darling). The historian must ask the question: what was the relation between this style of life and the organization and practice of gynaecology Bonney tried to foster?

Bonney's life raises other questions too, notably the issue of specialization. Bonney obviously cared little for obstetrics in a vocational sense. He saw gynaecology as a surgical discipline firmly wedded to the Royal College of Surgeons of England (he continued to do general abdominal surgery all his life). Obstetrics he envisioned as occupying a similar place. He fought a losing battle against the establishment of a college of obstetricians and gynaecologists (the word order here might be revealing, clearly the alphabet did not take precedence). Geoffrey Chamberlain, Emeritus Professor at St George's Hospital, has written a slim, but valuable conventional medical biography picturing a medical world perhaps not lost but certainly no longer visible. There are few references but there is a useful bibliography of all Bonney's publications. The volume is packed with detail in a small compass. There is much food for historical thought here.

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Richard J Wolfe, *Tarnished idol: William Thomas Green Morton and the introduction of surgical anesthesia. A chronicle of the ether controversy*, San Anselmo, CA, Norman Publishing, 2001, pp. xv, 672, illus., US$125.00 (hardback 0-939495-81-1). Orders to: Norman Publishing, PO Box 2566, San Anselmo, CA, 94979-2566, USA. E-mail: orders@jnorman.com.

This book could be described as the first revisionist history of the early years of general anaesthesia. Standard texts, both academic and popular, tell that the first successful public demonstration of inhalation anaesthesia was by the Boston dentist William T G Morton at the Massachusetts General Hospital in October 1846 and the succeeding events are drawn from two traditional biographical sources, Benjamin Perley Poore's *Historical materials for the biography of William T G Morton* of 1856, and Nathan P Rice's *Trials of a public benefactor* of 1858, which was commissioned by Morton himself. In these, Morton was the hero who picked up the baton dropped by Horace Wells, and carried it through to victory. More recent studies, for example the work of Leroy Vandam, questioned the accuracy of the established view, noting that there was no evidence that Morton ever qualified as either a dentist or a doctor. Against this background of uncertainty, and after nearly 150 years, comes this first full biography of Morton.

Richard J Wolfe, a distinguished medical librarian, has undertaken extensive research into previously unpublished material fundamental to the elucidation of the "ether controversy" and to the parts played by the many pivotal characters, such as Charles T Jackson. This includes correspondence, Congressional papers, and Land Registry documents. The first chapters come as a shock to the traditionalist, since they describe Morton's unscrupulous business dealings, failed partnerships, fraudulent practices, and debts. That Morton lacked